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to Improving Health Care, Washington Has a Full Plate this Year

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With a new Congress sworn in and the President preparing to give his State of the Union Address, now is a good time to look at some of the issues Washington must deal with in the coming year.

The top priority for the federal government remains national security, including waging and winning the war on terrorism. We've gone 15 months without a terrorist attack against our country. This success is good, but it is not a reason to get lulled into a false sense of security. We are fighting a war against a sophisticated enemy who is extremely difficult to detect and extremely patient. We cannot let our guard down.

One of our biggest challenges this year will be to get the Department of Homeland Security up and running. Congress created this Department last fall. It is the largest reorganization of our federal government since the end of World War II. It is also the most significant. Under this plan, 22 federal agencies with responsibility for keeping our nation secure will be brought together under one roof to better coordinate their actions.

As we prepare for a possible war in Iraq, it is also important that we make sure our military has the training, equipment, and resources it needs to succeed. After several years of shrinking defense budgets in the early to mid-1990s, Congress has increased defense spending the past few years. Another increase is likely for our forces in 2003. While these

increases are important, we have also got to make sure that we spend this money wisely and in a way that keeps our troops safe and our forces modern and up-to-date.

In addition to waging the war on terrorism and preparing for a possible war against Iraq, Congress must also take action in two other key areas, including:

Strengthening the Economy – The President recently proposed an economic growth package intended to give our economy a boost. While it is still unclear whether Congress will vote on this plan as it is currently written, it does contain several elements which should be considered. For instance, under the President's plan, a married couple with two children and an income of \$40,000 would see their taxes decline by \$1,133 (from \$1,178 to \$45) in 2003, a decline of 96 percent.

I have always believed that one of the keys to economic growth in America is to let people keep more of what they earn. Proposals like this particular one would certainly help achieve that goal.

Making Health Care More Affordable and Accessible – The Wall Street Journal recently reported that the federal government spent an average of \$5,035 per person on health care in 2001. Last year alone, spending on health care grew by a rate of 10 percent. This kind of increase is clearly putting a dent in people's pocketbooks – which is one of the reasons why Congress and the President will hopefully be able to reach agreement this year on a plan to strengthen and reform Medicare. This plan will likely include a voluntary prescription drug plan for seniors.

Rising health care costs are also making it more difficult for businesses to provide coverage to their workers, and doctors to provide care for their patients. It is important that Washington do all it can to get these costs down and make health care more affordable and accessible. Reforming the Nation's medical liability system is a good place to start.

I've heard from many doctors who are having trouble finding malpractice insurance and are either retiring from medicine or are no longer performing certain medical procedures as a result. That is just wrong. While you never want to take away a person's right to hold negligent doctors accountable, you also don't want to keep good doctors from providing care.

From waging the war on terrorism to strengthening the economy to providing better health care for all Americans, Washington faces a number of priorities this year. It is my hope that Congress and the President will be able to work together to meet these priorities and keep our country secure.